

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9557

INFO AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

AMCONSUL BELFAST

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 03440

E.O. 11652: XEDS-1

TAGS: PINT, ODEV, UK(NI)

SUBJECT: NORTHERN IRELAND: OUTLOOK AS CONSTITUTIONAL CON-
VENTION ENDS

REF: LONDON 568

SUMMARY - NI CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION OFFICIALLY ENDED MARCH 4, CLOSING ANOTHER CHAPTER IN NI'S TRAGIC POLITICAL HISTORY. DESPITE CONSIDERABLE SKILL AND FOREBEARANCE ON HMG'S PART. THE MEN OF ULSTER AGAIN FAILED TO RECONCILE THEIR BITTER POLITICAL DIFFERENCES AND TO DEVISE A GOVERNMENTAL SYSTEM THAT WOULD ALLOW THEM TO REGAIN HOME RULE. THE FAILURE IS LARGELY ATTRIBUTABLE TO THE HARD, INFLEXIBLE POSITION TAKEN BY THE PROTESTANT COALITION (UUUC) UNDER THE DE FACTO LEADERSHIP OF REV. IAN PAISLEY. CONTENTS OF NEXT CHAPTER ARE UNCERTAIN, EXCEPT THAT IT WILL OPEN WITH PERIOD OF DIRECT RULE FROM WESTMINSTER. IT WOULD ALSO APPEAR TO BE AN APPROPRIATE TIME TO REPLACE NI SECRETARY MERLYN REES WHO HAS DONE OUTSTANDING SERVICE OVER PAST TWO YEARS. END SUMMARY.

1. IN RECENT DISCUSSION WITH EMBOFF, NI UNDERSECRETARY DENIS TREVELYAN SAID THAT HMG WILL ALLOW NI CONSTITUTIONAL
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NAL CONVENTION TO END MARCH 3, AND WILL RESIST EFFORTS OF NI OOLITICAL LEADERS TO PROLONG ITS LIFE. (FINAL SESSION OF CONVENTION. ACCORDING TO PRESS, WAS STORMY AND INCLUDED SUGGESTION THAT UUUC LEADERS MIGHT TRY TO FORCE THEIR WAY INTO STORMONT NEXT WEEK.) TREVELYAN ATTRIBUTED CONVENTION FAILURE TO REV. PAISLEY WHO HAD GAINED EFFECTIVE CONTROL OF UUUC AND USED POLITICAL COERCION ON ANYONE LEARNING TOWARD COMPROMISE WITH CATHOLIC COMMUNITY. AS A RESULT OF THIS SITUATION, HMG HAS NO PLANS FOR A NEW INITIATIVE TO FIND POLITICAL SOLUTION IN NI, AND IS PREPARING FOR INDEFINITE PERIOD OF DIRECT RULE FROM WESTMINSTER. HMG ALSO CONSIDERED, BUT REJECTED, POSSIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING ADVISMRY COMMITTEE OF ULSTER POLITICIANS TO AID NIO DURING DIRECT RULE PERIOD. NIO HOPES DIRECT RULE WILL SOFTEN HARD-LINE PROTESTANT POLITICANS, MAKING THEM MORE FLEXIBLE, AND WILL BE ALERT TO ANY CHANGES IN THEIR ATTITUDES. LIKELIHOOD OF THIS HAPPENING, HOWEVER, IS NOT HIGH.

2. REGARDING SECURITY SITUATION, TREVELYAN ACKNOWLEDGED THAT BOTH PROTESTANT PARAMILITARY GROUPS AND PROVISIONAL IRA HAVE MADE MENACING NOISES ABOUT FUTURE, WHILE CONTINUING RELATIVELY LOW LEVEL OF VIOLENCE. DESPITE THEIR BRAVADO, NIO DOES NOT BELIEVE EITHER SIDE IS PREPARED TO LAUNCH MAJOR MFFENSIVE, THOUGH IT DOES NOT DISCOUNT THIS POSSIBILITY. THE SECURITY FORCES, HE SAID, COULD PROBABLY CONTAIN ANY SUCH EFFORT ON THE PROTESTANT SIDE, SHORT OF ANOTHER GENERAL STRIKE. THE IRA, FOR ITS PART, IS STEADILY GPOWING WEAKER, NOT WITHSTANDING THE RELEASE OF ITS DETAINEES AND THE REMISSION OF SENTENCES FOR MANY OF ITS FOLLOWERS WHO HAVE BEEN CONVICTED. THE VAST MAJORITY OF THOSE RELEASED FROM LONG KESH PRISON, HE SAID, HAVE NO DESIRE TO RETURN. MOREOVER, IRA SUPPORT IN THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY HAS REACHED NEW LOW. TO SUPPORT THIS ASSESSMENT TREVELYAN CITED THE IRA'S INABILITY TO CREATE A MAJOR INCIDENT FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF HUNGER STRIKER FRANK STAGG.

3. RESPONDING TO A QUESTION, TREVELYAN SAID HE HAD NO INSIDE INFORMATION AS TO NI SECRETARY REES' REPLACEMENT, BUT SAID NOW WOULD BE THE LOGICAL TIME FOR SUCH A CHANGE. CONFIDENTIAL

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REES, HE SAID, HAS DONE AN OUTSTANDING JOB UNDER EXCEEDINGLY DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES. THE CONVENTION'S FAILURE PUTS PAID TO HMG'S EFFORTS TO FIND OR IMPOSE A POLITICAL SOLUTION IN THAT PROVINCE: IT WILL NOW BITE THE BULLET AND RULE DIRECTLY. ACCORDINGLY, IT WOULD BE A GOOD TIME FOR A NEW MAN TO TAKE OVER. ONLY WILSON, HOWEVER, KNOWS WHETHER LOGIC WILL PREVAIL. LABOR'S NARROW ONE-SEAT MAJORITY

IN COMMONS MEANS THAT HIS OPTIONS ARE LIMITED WHEN IT COMES TO MAKING CHANGES IN THE CABINET. TREVELYAN, WHEN ASKED IF HE HAD HEARD ANY NAMES OF POSSIBLE REPLACEMENTS, MENTIONED ONLY ROY HATTERSLEY (MINISTER OF STATE, FOREIGN OFFICE), AND THIS REPORT HE CHARACTERIZED AS PURE SPECU-

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LATION. HE THEN MENTIONED THAT HE EXPECTS TO LEAVE THE NIO IN JUNE, RETURNING TO THE HOME OFFICE.

4. COMMENT: THE END OF THE CONVENTION WOULD APPEAR TO FORECLOSE ANY POSSIBILITY OF A POLITICAL SOLUTION IN THE SHORT TERM. WHETHER DIRECT RULE WILL MAKE THE PROTESTANT POLITICAL LEADERSHIP MORE FLEXIBLE REMAINS TO BE SEEN. WHENEVER SIGNS OF WAVERING APPEAR, PAISLEY AND OTHERS MOVE QUICKLY TO BRING THE POTENTIAL DEFECTORS BACK INTO LINE. AND THEY CAN BE EXPECTED TO CONTINUE THIS TACTIC. REGARDING THE SECURITY SITUATION, TREVELYAN SEEMED OVERLY SANGUINE, THOUGH HIS VIEWS UNDOUBTEDLY REFLECT THE SECURITY FORCES' ASSESSMENT. EVENTS TOO MAY TEST THIS JUDGMENT. WE CONCUR IN TREVELYAN'S THESIS THAT IT WOULD MAKE SENSE TO MOVE REES, WHO HAS DEMONSTRATED REMARKABLE SKILL

AND INGENUITY UNDER TRYING CONDITIONS. AT THIS JUNCTURE.
AS HE NOTED, HOWEVER, WILSON'S OPTIONS ARE LIMITED.
WILSON CAN HARDLY AFFORD TO MOVE ANY AGING CABINET MEM-
BERS TO LORDS WITH LABOR'S CURRENT MAJORITY. SO IT WILL
BE DIFFICULT TO BRING IN A NEW FACE (IT IS UNTHINKABLE
THAT REES WOULD BE RELEGATED TO THE BACKBENCHES AFTER HIS
SERVICE IN THE NIO). THUS, IF REES IS MOVED, HIS REPLACE
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MENT WILL PROBABLY BE A MEMBER OF THE CURRENT CABINET.

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